

President Trump, Please Read ‘Desert Solitaire’; Reconsiderations

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Body

In a 1973 TV spot, the United States Forest Service sage Smokey Bear admonished that “one careless second with a match and America the beautiful becomes America the ugly.” So what would Smokey say now when a few careless seconds with a pen allowed President Trump and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to remove protections from two million acres of precious American wilderness? If courts uphold [Trump’s executive orders of last December](#), they would reduce southern Utah’s Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante monuments by 85 and 46 percent, respectively, constituting the biggest rollback of federally protected land in American history.

But fear not, lovers of the Utah canyon country, for the ghost of free-spirited eco-warrior Edward Abbey once again gallops to the rescue via his eloquent and funny memoir “Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness,” first published 50 years ago this month and [reviewed by The Times](#) on this exact day in 1968. Set among the very Colorado Plateau ecosystem targeted by Trump’s executive orders, every gleaming page of Abbey’s autobiography virtually shouts out the necessity of protecting our public lands from desecration, and sings the nobility of wilderness defenders whose intrinsic value system rejects the “sweating scramble for profit and domination.” While at various junctures Abbey delineates on John Wesley Powell’s Geographic Expedition of 1869, the history of Mormonism and the night life at bars from Moab to Mexican Hat, it’s his fierce stewardship of the desert environment that continues to shine brightest.

When “Desert Solitaire” first appeared in 1968, its prose galvanized environmentalists toward bold action to save the American Southwest from the maw of hyper-industrialism. Only Aldo Leopold’s “A Sand County Almanac” and Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” equal “Desert Solitaire” in transforming the genre of naturalist studies into manifestoes for social change. Paradoxically gruff and tender, starkly Darwinian in scientific exactitude yet brimming with mystical flourishes, Abbey’s enlivening nonfiction storytelling — anchored around his two compressed seasons as a ranger in Utah’s Arches National Monument during the late Eisenhower era — is a perfectly rendered hybrid of transcendental joy, coyote humor, in-your-face wrath, field science detail, philosophical righteousness, and moral clarity. Half a century after its debut, it retains its potency as a motivational weapon of resistance, a polemic against despoilers and a reasoned paean to biological diversity, priceless petroglyphs and the heavenly solitude of wilderness. Facing Trump’s short-term vision of America’s public lands, it takes little imagination to read Abbey’s masterpiece today as a prescient counter-statement for defending not only Bears Ears and Grand Staircase–Escalante, but the entire slickrock Colorado Plateau.

Raised in the Alleghenies of western Pennsylvania, Abbey was rugged and self-assured, with the scraggly beard of an Old West prospector and the iconoclastic poise of a bohemian Yosemite Sam. In “Desert Solitaire,” he anoints the 76,000-acre Arches National Monument (now a national park) the “most beautiful place on earth.” Basking in the ethereal vastness, he eloquently describes the burned cliffs, corroded monoliths, natural bridges and talus slopes of this hard-edge cloud country. “Everything is lovely and wild, with a virginal sweetness,” he rhapsodizes.

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"The arches themselves, strange, impressive, grotesque, form but a small and inessential part of the general beauty of this country. When we think of rock we usually think of stones, broken rock, buried under soil and plant life, but here all is exposed and naked, dominated by the monolithic formations of sandstone which stand above the surface of the ground and extend for miles, sometimes level, sometimes tilted or warped by pressures from below, carved by erosion and weathering into an intricate maze of glens, grottoes, fissures, passageways and deep narrow canyons."

Abbey's detailed journals and notes from his time in the unfenced Utah backcountry formed the basis of "Desert Solitaire." When out-and-about as a ranger he felt intoxicated, as if time were suspended. Awed by the eternal beauty all around him, mirthful and full of delight, he melted into the landscape, living in rustic simplicity and natural fellowship with the desert's wildlife while developing a firm foundation in desert ecology. Inspired by Walt Whitman's dictum "Resist much, obey little," Abbey became an aggressive watchdog of Arches and the surrounding Utah canyonlands held sacred by the Hopi, Navajo, Ute and Pueblo of Zuni tribes. Patrolling in a Park Service pickup, often in uniform, he came to revile the bulldozers, dams, paved roads and industrial tourism that define Southwest development, and to channel that revulsion into ferocious, and at times anarchistic, prose.

In "Desert Solitaire" he denounces the mere thought of large-scale uranium mining in Utah's howling salmon-pink tableland, and he reminds a cynical and distrustful public — both a half-century ago and today — that the mission of the Park Service, from its 1916 establishment onward, is to preserve our treasured landscapes in an "unimpaired" fashion. "Wilderness preservation, like a hundred other good causes, will be forgotten under the overwhelming pressure of a struggle for mere survival and sanity in a completely urbanized, completely industrialized, even more crowded environment," he warned. "For my own part I would rather take my chances in a thermonuclear war than live in such a world."

There is a fine set-piece in "Desert Solitaire" where Abbey tacks a scarlet bandanna to a ridgepole outside his government-issued trailer house, then hangs Chinese wind-bells to chime in the dry breeze — a ritual of "poetry and revolution before breakfast." Then Abbey, the ranger, dutifully hoists Old Glory up the flagpole at Arches' entrance station, as mandated by the Park Service. Wishing "good swill" to all nations in a kind of off-handed prayer, he savages "swinish politics" for wrecking his beloved Southwestern landscapes. When he was writing, the Environmental Protection Agency, which oversaw decades of real improvement in protecting American lands and scrubbing pollutants from our air and water, still did not exist. It's a reminder both of how activism can break over dark times, and how, after notching victories, it can again get darker still. Were Abbey alive to see Trump's proposal to slash the agency's budget by a third in 2018, he would be apoplectic.

It's not too late for salvation. If Zinke would read "Desert Solitaire," hike Comb Ridge and the Grand Staircase—Escalante as Abbey regularly did, run the awesome San Juan River around Slickhorn Canyon, or camp under the lonely sky of Cedar Mesa, he might undergo a miraculous awakening and push Trump to rescind his reckless executive orders — but that, of course, is unlikely. Instead, Zinke behaves like an errand boy for the coal and petroleum industries, a faux cowboy who made his showboat debut as interior secretary by riding a horse to his first day in office, where he got right to work ransacking national monuments and pillaging Native American shrines, all to further the president's war on America's natural legacy and ingratiate himself to Utah's quick-dollar Senator Orrin Hatch.

Facing the most egregious rape of Western lands since the Glen Canyon Dam bisected the swift-flowing Colorado River, environmental crusaders are already fighting tooth-and-nail to preserve Bears Ears and Grand Staircase—Escalante. Within hours of Trump's executive orders, the Grand Canyon Trust, the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society and others filed suit. As these conservation heroes go to bat for us all, they'd do well to keep "Desert Solitaire" in their back pockets, providing a call to action or, at the least, uplifting smelling salts to boost their resolve.

Abbey's voice, like that of Thomas Paine in "Common Sense," never fades away. When confronted by industrial tyranny he would fume like a geyser basin. Outdoor recreation was his rebellion against the decaying and overcrowded cities. In the 1980s, as a succession of Reagan-era appointees sought to weaken protection of federal lands, "Desert Solitaire" became a must-read for environmentalists and Abbey found himself speaking to crowds of

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hundreds, denouncing money-grubbers who willy-nilly looted the public domain. [His death in 1989](#) silenced his outraged voice, but no one will ever be able to silence the power of "Desert Solitaire," his wild-goat cry to leave it as it was. "A civilization which destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original," Abbey warned, "is cutting itself off from its origins."

Douglas Brinkley is a professor of history at Rice University and author of "The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America."

PHOTO: The naturalist and novelist, Edward Abbey, in 1987. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Kirk McKoy/Los Angeles Times, via Getty Images FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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